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[Moon Jae-in Urges Trump-Kim Summit before U.S. Election](#)

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By Robert R. King

During a [video conference](#) between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and European Council President Charles Michel on June 20, the South Korean leader [said](#) “I believe there’s a need for North Korea and the United States to try dialogue one more time before the U.S. presidential election. The issues of nuclear programmes and sanctions will ultimately have to be resolved through North Korea-U.S. talks.” A South Korean presidential aide said that President Moon’s office had conveyed these views to the White House.

It seems a bit unusual that President Moon’s interest in midwifing another Trump-Kim summit was made public after a conversation with the head of the European Union. President Moon has played a key role in the U.S.-North Korean summitry that has taken place thus far, but making the proposal for a new summit public after a video conversation with the leaders of the European Union seemed inconsistent.

President Moon played a very visible role as the intermediary who brought a summit proposal to Trump in March 2018. That effort led to the [Singapore summit](#) three months later. It is not clear what role President Moon played in the second summit in Hanoi in February 2019. That meeting ended prematurely when the final dinner, the signing of a joint statement, and other planned concluding events were abruptly cancelled after failed initial meetings.

The third of the three Trump-Kim meetings took place one year ago in June 2019. This was the briefest and least formal of the meetings. On an official visit by President Trump to South Korea, the two leaders traveled to Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) where the three leaders met informally. Trump and Kim had a brief private meeting. Despite the friendly handshake and Trump’s much photographed footstep onto North Korean soil, the U.S.-North Korea relationship has languished.

Is Trump Interested in Another Summit?

The U.S. President seems a bit preoccupied with the [resurgent](#) COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Also, a new media frenzy has questioned “what did the President know and when did he know it” regarding reports that [Russian intelligence](#) were offering Taliban insurgents generous cash bounties for killing American soldiers in Afghanistan.

And looming over everything else for President Trump is the upcoming U.S. presidential election in November. At this point, the outlook for Trump does not appear to be so promising. The latest [polling](#) numbers suggest that Trump is lagging behind Joseph Biden by a significant margin, and in the last couple of months Biden has outraised Trump in [campaign cash](#).

In a normal election year, Trump would be frantically crisscrossing the country from one mass rally to another. His first effort to get into campaign rally mode in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 20, however, was a [disappointment](#). Preliminary publicity raised expectations with talk of

millions seeking tickets, but the audience filled only a third of the seats at the arena. Trump campaign staff were found infected with COVID-19 virus just before the rally began, and public health specialists publicly criticized the President for holding such a rally in the face of the intensifying pandemic.

Under these circumstances, President Trump may well be looking for a shiny bauble to dangle before the press to focus attention on him and draw attention away from the current domestic news stories that are less flattering. Another summit with Kim Jong-un could give him a new opportunity to change the news focus and let him play the role of global statesman.

On the other hand, with two previous summits and the meeting in the DMZ with Kim Jong-un from June 2018 to June 2019, the novelty and press-worthiness of another North Korea summit is certainly gone. Furthermore, there is a distinct risk that the erratic Kim Jong-un might not give Trump the diplomatic triumph he seeks, and another Hanoi-style diplomatic flop before massed media cameras and microphones could contribute to an electoral disaster at home. The risk-reward scale seems to be tilting heavily toward caution.

One straw in the wind, however, is that Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun [is visiting](#) Seoul and Tokyo for meetings on July 6. Before being elevated to his current position, Biegun was Senior Representative for North Korea Policy, and he negotiated with North Korean officials in connection with previous summits. Also traveling with Biegun is Allison Hooker, senior National Security Council staffer on North Korea, who is one of the most experienced U.S. government officials on this issue.

Where is Kim Jong-un?

A key unanswered question is whether Supreme Leader Kim is interested in hand holding in front of the cameras with President Trump. Over the last year North Korea has shown little interest in actually reaching an agreement with the United States. The North Koreans [walked away](#) from senior-level diplomatic meetings in Stockholm in the fall of 2019 and called the session “sickening.”

In January of 2020 one of Pyongyang’s most senior and most experienced diplomats [said](#) “Although Chairman Kim Jong-un has good personal feelings about President Trump, they are, in the true sense of the word, ‘personal’.” He then added that North Korea has “been deceived by the United States, being caught in the dialogue with it for over one year and a half, and that was lost time for us.” Just last month, North Korean marked the second anniversary of the Singapore Summit with the United States. On that commemorative occasion, the North Korean Foreign Minister [asked](#), “Do we need to keep holding hands with the United States?”

Another question is whether Kim Jong-un is in a position to be seen up close by western news media, which would be an essential part of any summit for Trump. Questions about Kim’s health surfaced in April when he failed to appear at the birthday commemoration of his grandfather Kim Il-sung. This is the most important national holiday in North Korea, and Kim Jong-un’s presence has been the high point of the commemoration in the past. Kim did not [reappear](#) until the festive opening of a new fertilizer factory after being absent from public view for over three weeks—the longest such gap in his public appearances since he assumed the leadership.

The [appointment](#) of Kim Jong-un’s sister Kim Yo-jong as an alternate member of the Party Politburo has raised questions about his health. His sister has increasingly played a leading role in verbal attacks on the United States and South Korea. She was the author of a harsh [attack](#) on South Korea for permitting defector organizations to launch balloons with leaflets from the South to float into the North. She [blasted](#) South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in and ordered the picture-worthy explosion that destroyed the liaison office where the two Koreas had contact offices on the North Korean side of the DMZ.

Kim Jong-un’s unexplained absences, the expanded role his sister is playing, and the harsh attacks on the United States and South Korea suggest some uncertainty regarding what might be going on behind the curtain with the North Korean leadership. This may not be the time for a close-up inspection of the Supreme Leader.

The other question is whether the North Korean leader wants to make a deal with Donald Trump at this time. North Korean diplomats and foreign policy analysts are reading the tea leaves regarding the upcoming United States election. They are likely questioning whether a high-level meeting with an American president whose reelection in four months is not a foregone conclusion. As Donald Trump has demonstrated since becoming U.S. President, changes in leadership can result in significant changes in policies. A Biden administration will have little interest in following through on Trump commitments to North Korea. Why risk making an agreement with a president who might not be around much longer? If Trump is reelected, another summit certainly could be in the cards. But there is little benefit for the North in rushing to meet before the election.

“As Sands through the Hourglass”

South Korean President Moon Jae-in has his own logic for pushing a summit. He is acutely aware that he has passed the mid-point of his presidency, and the South Korean constitution limits its chief executive to a single term. He has a strong working majority in the National Assembly, and his focus is his legacy. As a senior advisor to former president Roh Moo-hyun, he saw Roh hold a summit with Kim Jong-il, but it came at the end of his presidential term and he was not able to follow up with programs to cement the Sunshine policy. Moon rushed for a North-South summit early in his term, and he is now anxious to consolidate the progress made with the North. First and foremost that means getting the United States and North Korea together.

Moon sees Trump as a risk-taker, willing to break barriers and ignore foreign policy experts. He met three times with Kim Jong-un, although those summits produced meager results. Moon is also acutely aware of the United States political timetable. He fears that a Biden presidency will not be make quick progress with North Korea.

President Moon is likely to be a lame duck or even a former President before a new Biden administration has personnel in place and has completed necessary policy reviews to undertake innovative policies toward Pyongyang. Even if Trump wins reelection in November, Moon sees the sand spilling through the hourglass.

The North has taken a breath after its tantrum over the balloon crisis and after exploding the liaison office. South Korea responded to these outbursts by [abjectly bowing](#) to the North's demands to stop the sending of balloons. Now there is a very small window to make progress in relations with the North, and the President is determined to act quickly.

Is There Time for a Summit?

North Korea has seen the waning hours of a U.S. presidential administration and watched last ditch efforts to accomplish a particular goal before a new administration takes office. At the end of the Clinton Administration on October 24, 2000—just days before the American election—Secretary of State Madeleine Albright [visited](#) Pyongyang and negotiated with Kim Jong-il in an effort to make a breakthrough on denuclearization. She also held out the promise of a visit by U.S. President Bill Clinton if it were successful. The American diplomat was [warmly welcomed](#) and feted at one of Pyongyang's spectacular synchronized performances in the Pyongyang stadium, but no meaningful agreement was reached. North Korea wanted to deal with the new president.

After North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006, the George W. Bush Administration worked to the very end of the administration in an effort to reach a denuclearization agreement with North Korea. In June 2008 agreement was reached on the first steps with North Korea declaring fifteen nuclear sites in the Six Party Talks. Running against the clock, the Bush administration rescinded trade restrictions and began the process of removing the North from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. In October, agreement was reached on what would be included in verification protocol, and about that same time the United States announced it would provide North Korea with significant humanitarian assistance through the UN World Food Programme and some private American humanitarian organizations. By December, however, efforts to reach arrangement on verification of the nuclear agreement had broken down, and shortly after the Obama Administration took office food assistance was suspended because monitoring of distribution could not be assured, and North Korea tested its second nuclear weapon.

The bottom line is that North Korea has previous experience with urgent last ditch efforts to reach agreement with the United States to beat an election deadline. In the case of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, there was no question that this was the end of their tenure in office. There is no expectation that Trump will be that much better in dealing with their interests than Biden might be, so North Korea feels little urgency to rush into another summit. President Moon is the one participant who feels the greatest urgency to move quickly.

*Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America. He is former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights. **The views expressed here are his own.***

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